

St. Viggo

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Helen nearly suffocates me the night before the exhibit. She's walking around on her heels, big cotton puffs between her calloused toes, when she stumbles and falls on my head, which is stuffed beneath a pillow. "I'll never sleep again," I groan.

"You should do your nails. They're a mess," she says.

She has an appointment at six in the morning for her manicure. The nail technician refused at first, saying she didn't see her first customer until nine, but seventy bucks later she said it was possible. For an additional twenty she promised not to use the same color on anyone else.

"Maybe he can autograph your nails," I say, and she gives me a dirty look.

"I'm not here just to get his autograph," she says. "I appreciate his art."

Helen, otherwise known as my mother, discovered Viggo Mortensen somewhere around the time her marriage imploded. The two events are not related.

I flick on the television and flip aimlessly through channels. It's clear that I'm not going to get any sleep tonight, not while Helen prepares for her destiny. I find a channel where they show nothing but women eating ice cream cones, and I find this both alarming and intriguing. I imagine there are people who check into hotels just to see some of these channels.

Helen parades past my bed in a pair of black pumps. “What about these?” she asks. I could swear she’s getting shorter. The pumps make her feet look like cloven hoofs but I lie, because I want her to be happy again, and tell her they look classy, like something Meryl Streep might wear.

“Perfect,” she says, twirling in front of the mirror. She’s wearing a lilac dress with a frounce at the bottom. It swirls around her in a gauzy cloud, circling white calves marbled with spider veins. They make me sad, those veins; they make me sad for her—she didn’t ask for them—and for my father, who didn’t cause them. They make me sad even for Aimee, who bought the house across the street because she liked the turret, and thought my father was just being friendly when he offered to help her paint it.

I keep flipping channels until I run across a James Bond movie. It’s one of the good ones, with Sean Connery, unzipping a dress with one hand while he shoots over his shoulder with the other. There’s never any question about what he’s up to.

Helen starts brushing her hair with vigorous strokes. It’s a white blonde color usually seen only on dolls, or on women who’ve been thwarted. That’s her word for what’s been done to her, the violence of hosting dinner parties for the faculty, the trauma of playing golf at the club. All those years of scraping algae out of my father’s aquariums while Mozart played in the background. “Should I wear it up or down?” she asks anxiously.

“Up,” I say. “It makes you look more artistic.”

She squints in the mirror. “Do you really think so?”

“Definitely.”

“This dresses washes me out. I’m going to try the green one again.”

Viggo Mortensen is not my type of actor. I like men with biceps like thighs, like Vin Diesel. Sometimes I buy the biggest bag of flour possible and make my boyfriend, Brian, carry it from the store to our car. We have a lot of flour.

Helen steps out of her dress and I look away, embarrassed by all the pale flesh that will someday be mine. I don’t have the heart to tell her that it doesn’t matter if she wears a grass skirt or gift wrapping, she’ll be only one of the thousands of women streaming past him, proffering books, yellowed photos of babies, credit card bills, palms, and, in one grim case, a marriage certificate with the husband’s name crossed out, ready for his autograph. I agreed to fly two thousand miles with her to go to Viggo Mortensen’s art exhibit for moral support, not understanding what it would be like to see her in this state.

James Bond arches an eyebrow and a blonde collapses onto a bed. This is how I think of my father’s seductions, a raised eyebrow, a crooked finger, some deviation of a line, and then the subtle give of a student’s neck. He teaches anthropology but he can quote all the great poets. Toward the end, when Helen stopped having affairs to try to prove something, he’d started wearing an ascot, and she hadn’t even laughed. That was when I knew it was just a matter of time.

Aimee is not a student. She’s a nurse. I’m not sure how she could afford to buy the house across the street but I suspect she may have inherited a bit of money, or else she divorced a doctor, which is entirely possible considering that all she’s told me about her past is that she went to school in Albuquerque and when she was fifteen she was bitten by an ocelot at the zoo. Brian and I think it’s funny, in a

depressing way, that she was right under my father's nose all those years. He could have spared himself all those delicate extrications, those girls weeping under his office window like injured mourning doves.

"This green is too green," says Helen, slapping at her collarbone. "I don't want to be gaudy."

Suddenly I'm exhausted. I want nothing more than to be in Brian's bed, sound asleep under the weight of his arm-leg. "Promise me you won't throw yourself at him," I say. "I don't want to have to bail you out of jail for ripping off his shirt."

Her face wrinkles in a pained *moue*. "Please. It's not like that."

I check the alarm clock next to my bed and see that it's nearly three o'clock. In four hours we'll get up—assuming we sleep—and take a taxi to the art gallery after Helen gets her nails done so that we can wait in line for a few hours until the exhibit opens. She's always been fanatical about her nails. The first time she made me watch a Viggo Mortensen movie (something involving unhappy rich people, if you can imagine) she had painted her nails a shade of plum, pausing to stare at the screen whenever he was on, brush poised above her pinkie.

"Aren't his eyes the most marvelous blue?" she asked.

She had a habit of throwing dishes at my father, her good ones, inherited from a grandmother who'd carried them wrapped in scarves on a steamer ship, and I expected a certain amount of velocity from her. I couldn't reconcile her pitcher's arm with the moony expression on her face. "They're green," I said.

She squinted and leaned toward the television. "You're mistaken," she said, sounding worried.

My father appeared in the doorway, said hello to me, and folded

his arms across his paint-splattered chest. (There are three things I like about Aimee: one is that she convinced my father to stop wearing socks with sandals. The other two vary, depending on how guilty I feel.) “I was thinking,” he said, “that I should put together a lecture on the celebrity crushes of middle-aged women. Wouldn’t that be fascinating, Helen?”

She turned up the volume loud, so that suddenly Michael Douglas was bellowing something about his wife being fucked. “The thing about Viggo,” Helen shouted, ignoring my father, “is that he would never thwart anyone. He’s a gentleman.”

Helen began to wave her hands as if she was trying to fly away. The bottle of liquid plum tipped over and a stream of color pooled on the white carpet. A blotch, imperfect and permanent.

“I can bring you in as a guest speaker,” my father shouted. “You can tell them about how you wore out our VCR when that last movie came out on video.”

Helen gripped the arms of her chair, leaving purple stripes on the white material. Her eyes bulged as she stared at the television. “A perfect gentleman!” she screamed.

I left before the movie ended.

Viggo—she refers to him by his first name, as if he’s one of her canasta partners—understands women, according to Helen. Her hands shake as she tweezes an eyebrow. “How do you know?” I ask.

“I can tell.”

So can a lot of other women. They’ve converged in this New York hotel from as far away as British Columbia, drawn by the prom-

ise of split-second contact, his thumb accidentally grazing a knuckle as he hands over his signature. Many of them are Helen's age, polished and confident, like seasoned pearls, and when they laugh in the elevator they show a lot of teeth. They catcall at waiters after too many martinis in the lounge. Helen doesn't go that far but she does giggle when the waiter calls us "girls" during lunch. After that I stick to room service.

Helen stops mid-pluck and grips the mirror frame. "The tickets! Where are the tickets?" she squawks.

"In your purse."

She rummages through it with jerky movements. "They're gone," she wails. She yanks her raincoat off the foot of the bed and pulls the pockets inside out, groaning.

I heave myself out of bed and slip into the bathroom. Pause, groan, pause groan. I sit on the edge of the tub and press two fingers into my knees, right beneath my kneecaps. I often check for thwarting while Brian sleeps, moving as quietly as I can under the sheets, poking my elbows and knees and ankles to see if it's started. My theory is that it attacks the joints first. How else to explain Helen's shrinkage?

"What's James Bond doing?" I call.

Pause, groan. "He's talking to a German."

I find it, a small lump next to my left elbow, and a chill seeps through me. Lately Brian's been asking me to make him lunches, using the excuse that I may as well since I have to make myself one. He did agree to alternate weeks with me—Helen just shook her head at this—but I got tired of eating sardine sandwiches and potato chips.

I couldn't get mad at him for making crappy lunches; his generation has to be subtler than my father's.

One time I asked her if she'd ever told him, how much she hated reading *The New Yorker* so she'd have something witty to say after the roast beef, and how it had numbed her, the charity luncheons, the PTA, until she didn't see the point of getting out of bed. We were sitting side by side on the couch, watching my father and Aimee paint sunflowers on the turret's trim.

"I wouldn't give him the satisfaction," she said. Across the street, my father had playfully dabbed Aimee's nose with yellow paint. I wait until I hear a commercial come on before leaving the bathroom. The room is covered in clothes, shoes, cosmetics; it looks as if our suitcases have exploded. Helen sits on the floor, surrounded by blouses. Her eyes are wild, darting, the eyes of a snared animal. She suddenly jumps up and grabs both of my arms. "We're going to have to find a scalper," she hisses.

"Are you nuts? This isn't a Rolling Stones concert. Calm down, we'll find them."

She drops my arms and sinks to her knees. "What will I do?" she whispers. "What will I do?"

Helen was in a bad state the day that Brian and my father had moved the aquarium to Aimee's. She sat in the sunroom, decked out in a frilly dressing gown with an ice pack on her forehead (what did he care, if she lived or died?) while they hauled it out of the den. I was out front, watering the hydrangea, wishing I were anyplace else.

They came out the front door, my father walking backwards.

“Good thing I didn’t get the forty-gallon,” he said cheerfully. They were almost across the street when Helen came barreling out of the house. She descended on my father in a swirl of baby blue silk and kicked him in the ankle. He howled but he managed to hold on to the aquarium. She kicked him again. And again. Her pointy blue shoe kept drilling into the same ankle, blurred like a hummingbird’s wing. He let go. Brian struggled to hold on but it was no use; the aquarium hit the pavement and shattered.

Helen zoomed past me, back into the house, and seconds later something that looked like a plasma bag with a purple center dropped out of the sky and landed with a splat on the road. I looked up and saw another plasma bag flying over my head toward the road, where it landed with the same splat. Helen stood at the front door, holding her dressing gown closed with one hand and hurling plasma bags with the other.

I took a closer look and saw that they were sandwich bags, not plasma bags. Each bag contained one or two of my father’s fish. They were stacked in a box, waiting to be transported to their new home. Helen let go of her dressing gown and started throwing with both arms, her breasts jiggling in a faded black negligee. Bag after bag sailed over my head, tiny Danios and Cichlids, their mouths puckering open and shut, eyes unblinking in the harsh sunlight. Flying must have been a great surprise to them.

I see Helen, kneeling and lost in the middle of a hotel room, and I also see my father, running back and forth like a deranged ant, glass crunching under his feet as he tried to catch his babies. Brian and I stood frozen, me clinging to his giant bicep. The sun got in my

father's eyes and he couldn't see. That was the worst part, he told me later, when we were sipping margaritas in Aimee's back yard. He couldn't see them or hear them coming, but he could feel the plastic slip past his fingertips. One hit him in the forehead and a Betta slithered down his face like a liquid bruise, flicking his lips with its tail before plummeting to the ground. *Splat! Splat!* My mother killed a lot of fish that day.

In a flash of inspiration I think to check the pockets of a suit jacket that she tried on earlier. I step over her and dig it out from under the bed. "They're here!" I cry.

She snatches them from my hands and slips them in her wallet, murmuring a prayer of thanks. A minute later, in the middle of sharpening an eyeliner, she changes her mind and places them on the floor in front of the door.

James wraps his arms around a woman and the credits roll. Smug bastard. If he ever hit on me I'd turn him down flat. Not that he'd ever hit on me—my feet are too big, for one thing—but if he did he'd be sorry.

Suddenly I can't stand to be in the room any longer, watching Helen preen and fuss. I'd rather see her kill fish than witness this supplication, this simpering. What kind of healing does she expect tomorrow? She can't say.

"I'm going to go get a coffee. Do you want anything?" I ask. She holds an earring next to her eye and shakes her head at the mirror.

I walk down the hallway to the elevator. The lights are too bright and my eyes feel like they've been rubbed with cotton balls.

Tomorrow I'll have a headache from lack of sleep and everything will seem too loud, and I'll stand in line for four hours with a woman I barely know, giddy and furious in her pink dress, and on the plane home she'll drink too much gin and get weepy when she talks about how his eyes are neither blue nor green.

I hear a television behind one door, coughing from behind another. Most of them are silent. Singing drifts from my left and I stop to listen:

Amazing Grace

How sweet the sound

Their voices are high and soft, quiet, reverent. All around me the faithful are dreaming and praying sleepily in front of mirrors. Their pilgrimage is nearly over. St. Viggo, patron saint of raining fish: we beseech thee. □